

MORNING STAR



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Irise into darkness, away from the garden they watered with the blood of my friends. The Golden man who killed my wife lies dead beside me on the cold metal deck, life snuffed out by his own son's hand.

Autumn wind whips my hair. The ship rumbles beneath. In the distance, friction flames shred the night with brilliant orange. The Telemanuses descending from orbit to rescue me. Better that they do not. Better to let the darkness have me and allow the vultures to squabble over my paralyzed body.

My enemy's voices echo behind me. Towering demons with the faces of angels. The smallest of them bends. Stroking my head as he looks down at his dead father.

"This is always how the story would end," he says to me. "Not with your screams. Not with your rage. But with your silence."

Roque, my betrayer, sits in the corner. He was my friend. Heart too kind for his Color. Now he turns his head and I see his tears. But they are not for me. They are what he has lost. For the ones I have taken from him.

"No Ares to save you. No Mustang to love you. You are alone, Darrow." The Jackal's eyes are distant and quiet. "Like me." He lifts up a black eyeless mask with a muzzle on it and straps it to my face. Darkening my sight. "This is how it ends."

To break me, he has slain those I love.

But there is hope in those still living. In Sevro. In Ragnar and Dancer. I think of all my people bound in darkness. Of all the Colors on all the worlds, shackled and chained so that Gold might rule, and I feel the rage burn across the dark hollow he has carved in my soul. I am not alone. I am not his victim.

So let him do his worst. I am the Reaper.

I know how to suffer.

I know the darkness.

This is *not* how it ends.

1



ONLY THE DARK

Deep in darkness, far from warmth and sun and moons, I lie, quiet as the stone that surrounds me, imprisoning my hunched body in a dreadful womb. I cannot stand. Cannot stretch. I can only curl in a ball, a withered fossil of the man that was. Hands cuffed behind my back. Naked on cold rock.

All alone with the dark.

It seems months, years, millennia since my knees have unbent, since my spine has straightened from its crooked pose. The ache is madness. My joints fuse like rusted iron. How much time has passed since I saw my Golden friends bleeding out into the grass? Since I felt gentle Roque kiss my cheek as he broke my heart?

Time is no river.

Not here.

In this tomb, time is the stone. It is the darkness, permanent and unyielding, its only measure the twin pendulums of life—breath and the beating of my heart.

In. *Buh . . . bump. Buh . . . bump.*

Out. *Buh . . . bump. Buh . . . bump.*

In. *Buh . . . bump. Buh . . . bump.*

And forever it repeats. Until . . . Until when? Until I die of old age? Until I crush my skull against the stone? Until I gnaw out the tubes the Yellows threaded into my lower gut to force nutrients in and wastes out?

Or until you go mad?

“No.” I grind my teeth.

Yesssss.

“It’s only the dark.” I breathe in. Calm myself. Touch the walls in my soothing pattern. Back, fingers, tailbone, heels, toes, knees, head. Repeat. A dozen times. A hundred. Why not be sure? Make it a thousand.

Yes. I’m alone.

I would have thought there to be worse fates than this, but now I know there are none. Man is no island. We need those who love us. We need those who hate us. We need others to tether us to life, to give us a reason to live, to feel. All I have is the darkness. Sometimes I scream. Sometimes I laugh during the night, during the day. Who knows now? I laugh to pass the time, to exhaust the calories the Jackal gives me and make my body shiver into sleep.

I weep too. I hum. I whistle.

I listen to voices above. Coming to me from the endless sea of darkness. And attending them is the maddening clatter of chains and bones, vibrating through my prison walls. All so close, yet a thousand kilometers away, as if a whole world existed just beyond the darkness and I cannot see it, cannot touch it, taste it, feel it, or pierce that veil to belong to the world once again. I am imprisoned in solitude.

I hear the voices now. The chains and bones trickling through my prison.

Are the voices mine?

I laugh at the idea.

I curse.

I plot. *Kill.*

Slaughter. Gouge. Rip. Burn.

I beg. I hallucinate. I bargain.

I whimper prayers to Eo, happy she was spared a fate like this.

She's not listening.

I sing childhood ballads and recite *Dying Earth*, *The Lamplighter*, the *Ramayana*, *The Odyssey* in Greek and Latin, then in the lost languages of Arabic, English, Chinese, and German, pulling from memories of dataDrops Matteo gave me when I was barely more than a boy. Seeking strength from the wayward Argive who only wished to find his way home.

You forget what he did.

Odysseus was a hero. He broke the walls of Troy with his wooden horse. Like I broke the Bellona armies in the Iron Rain over Mars.

And then . . .

“No,” I snap. “Quiet.”

. . . men entered Troy. Found mothers. Found children. Guess what they did?

“Shut up!”

You know what they did. Bone. Sweat. Flesh. Ash. Weeping. Blood. The darkness cackles with glee.

Reaper, Reaper, Reaper . . . All deeds that last are painted in blood.

Am I asleep? Am I awake? I've lost my way. Everything bleeding together, drowning me in visions and whispers and sounds. Again and again I jerk Eo's fragile little ankles. Break Julian's face. Hear Pax and Quinn and Tactus and Lorn and Victra sigh their last. So much pain. And for what? To fail my wife. To fail my people.

And fail Ares. Fail your friends.

How many are even left?

Sevro? Ragnar?

Mustang?

Mustang. What if she knows you're here . . . What if she doesn't care . . . And why would she? You who betrayed. You who lied. You who used her mind. Her body. Her blood. You showed her your true face and she ran. What if it was her? What if she betrayed you? Could you love her then?

“Shut up!” I scream at myself, at the darkness.

Don't think of her. Don't think of her.

Why ever not? You miss her.

A vision of her is spawned in the darkness like so many before it—a girl riding away from me across a field of green, twisting in her saddle and laughing for me to follow. Hair rippling as would summer hay fluttering from a farmer's wagon.

You crave her. You love her. The Golden girl. Forget that Red bitch.

“No.” I slam my head against the wall. “It's only the dark,” I whisper. Only the dark playing tricks on my mind. But still I try to forget Mustang, Eo. There is no world beyond this place. I cannot miss what does not exist.

Warm blood trickles down my forehead from old scabs, now freshly broken. It drips off my nose. I extend my tongue, probing the cold stone till I find the drops. Savor the salt, the Martian iron. Slowly. Slowly. Let the novelty of sensation last. Let the flavor linger and remind me I am a man. A Red of Lykos. A Helldiver.

No. You are not. You are nothing. Your wife abandoned you and stole your child. Your whore turned from you. You were not good enough. You were too proud. Too stupid. Too wicked. Now, you are forgotten.

Am I?

When last I saw the Golden girl, I was on my knees beside Ragnar in the tunnels of Lykos, asking Mustang to betray her own people and live for more. I knew that if she chose to join us, Eo's dream would blossom. A better world was at our fingertips. Instead, she left. Could she forget me? Has her love for me left her?

She only loved your mask.

“It's only the dark. Only the dark. Only the dark,” I mumble faster and faster.

I should not be here.

I should be dead. After the death of Lorn, I was to be given to Octavia so her Carvers could dissect me to discover the secrets of how I became Gold. To see if there could be others like me. But the Jackal made a bargain. Kept me for his own. He tortured me in his Attica estate, asking about the Sons of Ares, about Lykos and my family.

Never telling me how he discovered my secret. I begged him to end my life.

In the end, he gave me stone.

“When all is lost, honor demands death,” Roque once told me. “It is a noble end.” But what would a rich poet know of death? The poor know death. Slaves know death. But even as I yearn for it, I fear it. Because the more I see of this cruel world, the less I believe it ends in some pleasant fiction.

The Vale is not real.

It’s a lie told by mothers and fathers to give their starving children a reason for the horror. There is no reason. Eo is gone. She never watched me fight for her dream. She did not care what fate I made at the Institute or if I loved Mustang, because the day she died, she became nothing. There is nothing but this world. It is our beginning and our end. Our one chance at joy before the dark.

Yes. But you don’t have to end. You can escape this place, the darkness whispers to me. Say the words. Say them. You know the way.

It is right. I do.

“All you must say is ‘I am broken,’ and this will all end,” the Jackal said long ago, before he lowered me into this hell. “I will put you in a lovely estate for the rest of your days and send you warm, beautiful Pinks and food enough to make you fatter than the Ash Lord. But the words carry a price.”

Worth it. Save yourself. No one else will.

“That price, dear Reaper, is your family.”

The family he seized from Lykos with his lurchers and now keeps in his prison in the bowels of his Attica fortress. Never letting me see them. Never letting me tell them I love them, and that I’m sorry I was not strong enough to protect them.

“I will feed them to the prisoners of this fortress,” he said. “These men and women you think should rule instead of Gold. Once you see the animal in man, you will know that I am right and you are wrong. Gold must rule.”

Let them go, the darkness says. The sacrifice is practical. It is wise.

“No . . . I won’t . . .”

Your mother would want you to live.

Not at that price.

What man could grasp a mother's love? Live. For her. For Eo.

Could she want that? Is the darkness right? After all, I'm important. Eo said so. Ares said so; he chose me. Me of all the Reds. I can break the chains. I can live for more. It's not selfish for me to escape this prison. In the grand scheme of things, it is selfless.

Yes. Selfless, really . . .

Mother would beg me to make this sacrifice. Kieran would understand. So would my sister. I can save our people. Eo's dream must be made real, no matter the cost. It's my responsibility to persevere. It is my right.

Say the words.

I slam my head into the stone and scream at the darkness to go away. It cannot trick me. It cannot break me.

Didn't you know? All men break.

Its high cackle mocks me, stretching forever.

And I know it is right. All men break. I did already under his torture. I told him that I was from Lykos. Where he could find my family. But there is a way out, to honor what I am. What Eo loved. To silence the voices.

"Roque, you were right," I whisper. "You were right." I just want to be home. To be gone from here. But I can't have that. All that's left, the only honorable path for me, is death. Before I betray even more of who I am.

Death is the way out.

Don't be a fool. Stop. Stop.

I lurch my head forward into the wall harder than before. Not to punish, but to kill. To end myself. If there is no pleasant end to this world, then nothingness will suffice. But if there is a Vale beyond this plane, I will find it. I'm coming, Eo. At last, I am on my way. "I love you."

No. No. No. No. No.

I crash my skull again into stone. Heat pours down my face. Sparks of pain dance in the black. The darkness wails at me, but I do not stop.

If this is the end, I will rage toward it.

But as I pull back my head to deliver one last great blow, existence groans. Rumbling like an earthquake. Not the darkness. Something beyond. Something in the stone itself, growing louder and deeper above me, till the darkness cracks and a blazing sword of light slashes down.

2



PRISONER L17L6363

The ceiling parts. Light burns my eyes. I clamp them shut as the floor of my cell rises upward till, with a click, it stops and I rest, exposed, on a flat stone surface. I push out my legs and gasp, nearly fainting from the pain. Joints crack. Knotted tendons unspool. I fight to reopen my eyes against the raging light. Tears fill them. It is so bright I can only catch bleached flashes of the world around.

Fragments of alien voices surround me. “Adrius, what is this?”

“. . . has he been in there this whole time?”

“The stench . . .”

I lie upon stone. It stretches around me to either side. Black, rippling with blue and purple, like the shell of a Creonian beetle. A floor? No. I see cups. Saucers. A cart of coffee. It’s a table. That was my prison. Not some hideous abyss. Just a meter-wide, twelve-meter-long slab of marble with a hollow center. They’ve eaten inches above me every night. Their voices the distant whispers I heard in the darkness. The clatter of their silverware and plates my only company.

“Barbaric . . .”

I remember now. This is the table the Jackal sat at when I visited him after recovering from the wounds incurred during the Iron Rain.

Did he plan my imprisonment even then? I wore a hood when they put me in here. I thought I was in the bowels of his fortress. But no. Thirty centimeters of stone separated their suppers from my hell.

I look up from the coffee tray by my head. Someone stares at me. Several someones. Can't see them through the tears and blood in my eyes. I twist away, coiling inward like a blind mole unearthed for the very first time. Too overwhelmed and terrified to remember pride or hate. But I know he stares at me. The Jackal. A childish face in a slender body, with sandy hair parted on the side. He clears his throat.

"My honored guests. May I present prisoner L17L6363."

His face is both heaven and hell.

To see another man . . .

To know I am not alone . . .

But then to remember what he's done to me . . . it rips my soul out.

Other voices slither and boom, deafening in their loudness. And, even curled as I am, I feel something beyond their noise. Something natural and gentle and kind. Something the darkness convinced me I would never feel again. It drifts softly through an open window, kissing my skin.

A late autumn breeze cuts through the meaty, humid stink of my filth and makes me think that somewhere a child is sprinting through snow and trees, running his hands along bark and pine needles and getting sap in his hair. It's a memory I know I've never had, but feel like I should. That's the life I would have wanted. The child I could have had.

I weep. Less for me than for that boy who thinks he lives in a kind world, where Mother and Father are as large and strong as mountains. If only I could be so innocent again. If only I knew this moment was not a trick. But it is. The Jackal does not give except to take away. Soon the light will be a memory and darkness will return. I keep my eyes clenched tight, listening to the blood from my face drip on the stone, and wait for the twist.

"Goryhell, Augustus. Was this really necessary?" a feline killer purrs. Husky accent smothered in that indolent Luna lilt learned in the courts of the Palatine Hill, where all are less impressed by everything than anyone else. "He smells like death."

“Fermented sweat and dead skin under the magnetic shackles. See the yellowish crust on his forearms, Aja?” the Jackal notes. “Still, he’s very much healthy and ready for your Carvers. All things considered.”

“You know the man better than I,” Aja says to someone else. “Make sure it is him. Not an imposter.”

“You doubt my word?” the Jackal asks. “You wound me.”

I flinch, feeling someone approach.

“Please. You’d need a heart for that, ArchGovernor. And you’ve many gifts, but that organ, I’m afraid, is dearly absent.”

“You compliment me too much.”

Spoons clatter against porcelain. Throats are cleared. I long to cover my ears. So much sound. So much information.

“You really can see the Red in him now.” It’s a cold, cultured female voice from northern Mars. More brusque than the Luna accent.

“Exactly, Antonia!” the Jackal replies. “I’ve been curious to see how he turned out. A member of the Aureate genus could never be so debased as this creature here before us. You know, he asked me for death before I put him in there. Started weeping about it. The irony is he could have killed himself whenever he chose. But he didn’t, because some part of him relished that hole. You see, Reds long ago adapted to darkness. Like worms. No pride to their rusty race. He was at home down there. More than he ever was with us.”

Now I remember hate.

I open my eyes to let them know I see them. Hear them. Yet as my eyes open, they are drawn not to my enemy, but to the winter vista that sprawls out the windows behind the Golds. There, six of the seven mountain peaks of Attica glitter in the morning light. Metal and glass buildings crest stone and snow, and yawn upward toward the blue sky. Bridges suture the peaks together. A light snow falls. It’s a blurred mirage to my nearsighted cave eyes.

“Darrow?” I know the voice. I turn my head slightly to see one of his callused hands on the edge of the table. I flinch away, thinking it will strike me. It doesn’t. But the hand’s middle finger bears the golden eagle of Bellona. The family I destroyed. The other hand belongs to the arm I cut off on Luna when we last dueled, the one that was remade by Zanzibar the Carver. Two wolfshad rings of House Mars

encircle those fingers. One is mine. One his. Each worth the price of a young Gold's life. "Do you recognize me?" he asks.

I crane my head to look up at his face. Broken I may be, but Cassius au Bellona is undimmed by war or time. More beautiful by far than memory could ever allow, he pulses with life. Over two meters tall. Cloaked in the white and gold of the Morning Knight, his coiled hair lustrous as the trail of a falling star. He's clean-shaven, and his nose slightly crooked from a recent break. When I meet his eyes, I do all I can to not fall into sobs. The way he looks at me is sad, nearly tender. What a shadow of myself I must be to earn pity from a man I've hurt so deeply.

"*Cassius*," I murmur with no agenda except to say the name. To speak to another human. To be heard.

"And?" Aja au Grimmus asks from behind Cassius. The most violent of the Sovereign's Furies wears the same armor I saw her in when first we met in the Citadel spire on Luna, the night Mustang rescued me and Aja beat Quinn to death. It's scuffed. Battle-worn. Fear overwhelms my hate, and I look away from the dark-skinned woman yet again.

"He's alive after all," Cassius says quietly. He turns on the Jackal. "What did you do to him? The scars . . ."

"I should think it obvious," the Jackal says. "I have unmade the Reaper."

I finally look down at my body past my ratty beard to see what he means. I am a corpse. Skeletal and pallid. Ribs erupt from skin thinner than the film atop heated milk. Knees jut from spindly legs. Toenails have grown long and grasping. Scars from the Jackal's torture mottle my flesh. Muscle has withered. And tubes that kept me alive in the darkness erupt from my belly, black and stringy umbilical cords still anchoring me to the floor of my cell.

"How long was he in there?" Cassius asks.

"Three months of interrogation, then nine months of solitary."

"Nine . . ."

"As is fitting. War shouldn't make us abandon metaphor. We're not savages after all, eh, Bellona?"

"Cassius's sensibilities are offended, Adrius," Antonia says from

her place near the Jackal. She's a poisoned apple of a woman. Shiny and bright and promising, but rotten and cancerous to the core. She killed my friend Lea at the Institute. Put a bullet in her own mother's head, and then two more into her sister Victra's spine. Now she's allied with the Jackal, a man who crucified her at the Institute. What a world. Behind Antonia stands dark-faced Thistle, once a Howler, now a member of the Jackal's Boneriders by the looks of the jackal skull pennant on her chest. She looks at the floor instead of at me. Her captain is bald-headed Lilath, who sits at the Jackal's right hand. His favorite personal killer ever since the Institute.

"Pardon me if I fail to see the purpose of torturing a fallen enemy," Cassius answers. "Especially if he's given all the information he has to give."

"The purpose?" The Jackal stares at him, eyes quiet, as he explains. "The purpose is punishment, my goodman. This . . . *thing* presumed he belonged among us. Like he was an equal, Cassius. A superior, even. He mocked us. Bedded my *sister*. He laughed at us and played us for fools before we found him out. He must know it was not chance that he lost, but inevitability. Reds have always been cunning little creatures. And he, my friends, is the personification of what they wish to be, what they will be if we let them. So I let time and darkness remake him into what he really is. A *Homo flammeus*, to use the new classification system I proposed to the Board. Barely different from *Homo sapiens* on the evolutionary timeline. The rest was just a mask."

"You mean he made a fool of *you*," Cassius parses, "when your father preferred a carved-up Red to his blood heir? That's what this is, *Jackal*. The petulant shame of a boy unloved and unwanted."

The Jackal twitches at that. Aja's equally displeased by her young companion's tone.

"Darrow took Julian's life," Antonia says. "Then slaughtered your family. Cassius, he sent killers to butcher the children of your blood as they hid on Olympus Mons. One would wonder what your mother would think of your pity."

Cassius ignores them, jerking his head toward the Pinks at the edge of the room. "Fetch the prisoner a blanket."

They do not move.

“Such manners. Even from you, Thistle?” She gives no answer. With a snort of contempt, Cassius strips off his white cloak and drapes it over my shivering body. For a moment, no one speaks, as struck by the act as I.

“*Thank you,*” I croak. But he looks away from my hollow face. Pity is not forgiveness, nor is gratitude absolution.

Lilath snorts a laugh without looking up from her bowl of soft-boiled hummingbird eggs. She slurps at them like candy. “There *is* a point when honor becomes a flaw of character, Morning Knight.” Sitting beside the Jackal, the bald woman peers up at Aja with eyes like those of the eels in Venus’s cavern seas. Another egg goes down. “Old man Arcos learned the hard way.”

Aja does not reply, her manners faultless. But a deathly silence lurks inside the woman, a silence I remember from the moments before she killed Quinn. Lorn taught her the blade. She will not like seeing his name mocked. Lilath greedily swallows another egg, sacrificing manners for insult.

There’s animosity between these allies. As always with their kind. But this seems a stark new division between the old Golds and the Jackal’s more modern breed.

“We’re all friends here,” the Jackal says playfully. “Mind your manners, Lilath. Lorn was an Iron Gold who simply chose the wrong side. So, Aja, I’m curious. Now that my lease on the Reaper is up, do you still plan to dissect him?”

“We do,” Aja says. Shouldn’t have thanked Cassius after all. His honor isn’t true. It’s just sanitary. “Zanzibar is curious to discover how he was made. He has his theories, but he’s champing at the bit for the specimen. We were hoping to round up the Carver that did the deed, but we think he perished in a missile strike up in Kato, Alcidalia province.”

“Or they want you to think that,” Antonia says.

“You once had him here, didn’t you?” Aja asks pointedly.

The Jackal nods. “Mickey’s his name. Lost his license after he carved an unlicensed Aureate birth. Family tried sparing their child the Exposure. Anyway, he specialized in blackmarket aerial and

aquatic pleasure mods afterward. Had a carveshop in Yorkton before the Sons recruited him for a special job. Darrow helped him escape my custody. If you want my opinion, he's still alive. My operatives place him in Tinos."

Aja and Cassius exchange a look.

"If you have a lead on Tinos, you need to share it with us now," Cassius says.

"I have nothing definitive yet. Tinos is well hidden. And we've yet to capture one of their ship captains . . . alive." The Jackal sips his coffee. "But irons are in the fire, and you'll be the first to know if anything comes of them. Though, I rather think my Boneriders would like the first crack at the Howlers. Wouldn't you, Lilath?"

I try not to stir at the mention of the name. But it's hard not to. They're alive. Some of them, at least. And they chose the Sons of Ares over Gold. . . .

"Yes, sir," Lilath says, studying me. "We'd relish a real hunt. Fighting the Red Legion and the other insurgents is a bore, even for Grays."

"The Sovereign needs us home anyway, Cassius," Aja says. Then, to the Jackal: "We'll be departing as soon as my Thirteenth has de-camped from the Golan Basin. Likely by morning."

"You're taking your legions back to Luna?"

"Just the Thirteenth. The rest will remain under your supervision."

The Jackal is surprised. "My supervision?"

"On loan till this . . . *Rising* is fully snuffed out." She practically spits the word. A new one to my ears. "It's a token of the Sovereign's trust. You know she is pleased with your progress here."

"Despite your methods," Cassius adds, drawing an annoyed look from Aja.

"Well, if you're leaving in the morning you should, of course, dine with me this evening. I've been wanting to discuss certain . . . policies regarding the Rebels in the Rim." The Jackal is vague because I'm listening. Information's his weapon. Suggesting my friends betrayed me. Never saying which. Dropping hints and clues during my torture, before I was sent into the dark. A Gray telling him that his sister is waiting in his salon. His fingers smelling like frothed chai tea, his sis-

ter's favorite drink. Does she know I am here? Has she sat at this table? The Jackal is still prattling on. Hard to track the voices. So much to decipher. Too much.

"... I'll have my men clean Darrow up for his travels and we can throw a feast of Trimalchian proportions after our discussion. I know the Voloxes and the Corialuses would be delighted to see you again. It's been too long since I had such august company as two Olympic Knights. You're in the field so often, skirting around provinces, hunting through the tunnels and seas and ghettos. How long has it been since you had a fine meal without worry of a night raid or suicide bombers?"

"A spell," Aja admits. "We took the Brothers Rath up on their hospitality when we passed through Thessalonica. They were eager to show their loyalty after their . . . behavior during the Lion's Rain. It was . . . unsettling."

The Jackal laughs. "I fear my dinner will be tame by comparison. It's been all politicians and soldiers of late. This gorydamn war has so impeded my social calendar, as you can imagine."

"Sure it's not your reputation for hospitality?" Cassius asks. "Or your diet?"

Aja sighs, trying to hide her amusement. "Manners, Bellona."

"Not to fear . . . the enmity between our houses is hard to forget, Cassius. But we must find common ground in times like these. For the sake of Gold." The Jackal smiles, though inside I know he's imagining sawing off both their heads with a dull knife. "Anyway, we all have our schoolyard stories. I'm hardly ashamed."

"There *was* one other matter we wished to discuss," Aja says.

It's Antonia's turn to sigh. "I told you there would be. What does our Sovereign require now?"

"It pertains to what Cassius mentioned earlier."

"My methods," the Jackal confirms.

"Yes."

"I thought the Sovereign was pleased with the pacification effort."

"She is, but . . ."

"She asked for order. I have provided. Helium-3 continues to flow,

with only a three point two percent decrease in production. The Rising is struggling for air; soon Ares will be found and Tinos and all this will be behind us. Fabii is the one who is taking his—”

Aja interrupts. “It’s the kill squads.”

“Ah.”

“And the liquidation protocols you’ve instituted in rebellious mines. She’s worried that the severity of your methods against the lowReds will create a backlash comparable to earlier propaganda setbacks. There have been bombings on the Palatine Hill. Strikes in latfundias on Earth. Even protests at the gate of the Citadel itself. The spirit of rebellion is alive. But it is fractured. It must remain so.”

“I doubt we’ll be seeing many more protests after the Obsidians are sent in,” Antonia says smugly.

“Still . . .”

“There is no danger of my tactics reaching the public eye. The Sons’ abilities to propagate their message has been neutered,” the Jackal says. “I control the message now, Aja. The people know this war is already lost. They’ll never see a picture of the bodies. Never glimpse a liquidated mine. What they will continue to see is Red attacks on civilian targets. MidColor and highColor children dead in schools. The public is with us. . . .”

“And if they do see what you’re doing?” Cassius asks.

The Jackal does not immediately reply. Instead, he signals a barely dressed Pink over from the couches in the adjacent sitting room. The girl, hardly older than Eo was, comes to his side and stares meekly at the ground. Her eyes are rose quartz, her hair a silvery lilac that hangs in braids down to her bare lower back. She was raised to pleasure these monsters, and I fear knowing what those soft eyes of hers have seen. My pain seems suddenly so tiny. The madness in my mind so quiet. The Jackal strokes the girl’s face and, still looking at me, shoves his fingers into her mouth, prying her teeth apart. He moves the girl’s head with his stump so I can see, then so Aja and Cassius might.

She has no tongue.

“I did this myself after we took her eight months ago. She attempted to assassinate one of my Boneriders at an Agea Pearl club. She hates me. Wants nothing more in this world than to see me rot-

ting in the ground.” Letting go of her face, he pops his sidearm out of his holster and thrusts it into the girl’s hands. “Shoot me in the head, Calliope. For all the indignities I have heaped upon you and your kind. Go on. I took your tongue. You remember what I did to you in the library. It will happen again and again and again.” He returns his hand to her face, squeezing her fragile jaw. “And again. *Pull the trigger, you little tart*. Pull it!” The Pink shakes in fear and throws the gun on the floor, falling to her knees to clutch his feet. He stands benevolent and loving above her, touching her head with his hand.

“There, there, Calliope. You did well. You did well.” The Jackal turns to Aja. “For the public, honey is always better than vinegar. But for those who war with wrenches, with poison, with sabotage in the sewers and terror in the streets, and nibble at us like cockroaches in the night, fear is the only method.” His eyes find mine. “Fear and extermination.”

3



SNAKEBITE

Blood beads where buzzing metal pinches my scalp. Dirty blond hair puddles onto the concrete as the Gray finishes scalping me with an electric razor. His compatriots call him Danto. He rolls my head around to make sure he's got it all before clapping me hard on the top of it. "How 'bout a bath, *dominus*?" he asks. "Grimmus likes her prisoners to smell nice 'n civil, hear?" He taps the muzzle they strapped to my face after I tried to bite one of them. They moved me with an electric collar around my neck, arms bound still behind my back, a squad of twelve hardcore lurchers dragging me through the halls like a bag of trash.

Another Gray jerks me from my chair by my collar as Danto goes to pull a power hose from the wall. They're more than a head shorter than I am, but compact and rugged. The lives they live are hard—chasing Outriders in the belt, stalking Syndicate killers through the depths of Luna, hunting Sons of Ares in the mines . . .

I hate them touching me. All the sights and sounds they make. It's too much. Too gruff. Too hard. Everything they do hurts. Jerking me around. Slapping me casually. I try my best to keep the tears away, but I don't know how to compartmentalize it all.

The line of twelve soldiers crowds together, watching me as Danto aims the hose. They've got three Obsidian men with them. Most lurcher squads do. The water hits me like a horse kick in the chest. Tearing skin. I spin on the concrete floor, sliding across the room till I'm pinned in the corner. My skull slams against the wall. Stars swarm my sight. I swallow water. Choking, hunching to protect my face because my hands are still pinned behind my back.

When they've finished, I'm still gasping and coughing around the muzzle, trying to suck in air. They uncuff me and slip my arms and legs into a black prisoner's jumpsuit before binding me again. There's a hood too that they'll soon jerk over my head to rob me of what little humanity I have left. I'm thrown back into the chair. They click my restraints into the chair's receptacle so I'm locked down. Everything's redundant. Every move watched. They guard me like what I was, not what I am. I squint at them, vision bleary and nearsighted. Water drips from my eyelashes. I try to sniff, but my nose is clogged tight with congealed blood from nostril to nasal cavity. They broke it when they put the muzzle on.

We're in a processing room for the Board of Quality Control, which oversees the administrative functions of the prison beneath the Jackal's fortress. The building has the concrete box shape of every government facility. Poisonous lighting makes everyone here look like a walking corpse with pores the size of meteor craters. Aside from the Grays, the Obsidian, and a single Yellow doctor, there's a chair, an examination table, and a hose. But the fluid stains around the floor's metal drain and the nail scratches on the metal chair are the face and soul of this room. The ending of lives begins here.

Cassius would never come to this hole. Few Golds would ever need or want to unless they made the wrong enemies. It's the inside of the clock, where the gears whir and grind. How could anyone be brave in a place so inhuman as this?

"Crazy, ain't it?" Danto asks those behind him. He looks back at me. "All my life, never seen something so slaggin' odd."

"Carver musta put a hundred kilos on him," says another.

"More. Ever see him in his armor? He was a damned monster."

Danto flicks my muzzle with a tattooed finger. "Bet it hurt bein'

born twice. Gotta respect that. Pain's the universal language. Ain't it, *Ruster*?" When I don't respond, he leans forward and stomps on my bare foot with his steel-heeled boot. The big toenail splits. Pain and blood rupture from the exposed nail bed. My head lolls sideways as I gasp. "Ain't it?" he asks again. Tears leak from my eyes, not from the pain, but from the casualness of his cruelty. It makes me feel so small. Why does it take so little for him to hurt me so much? It almost makes me miss the box.

"He's only a baboon in a suit," another says. "Leave off him. He don't know any better."

"Don't know any better?" Danto asks. "Bullshit. He liked the fit of master's clothes. Liked lording over us." Danto crouches so he's looking into my eyes. I try to look away, frightened he'll hurt me again, but he seizes my head and pulls open my eyelids with his thumbs so we're eye to eye. "Two of my sisters died in that Rain of yours, *Ruster*. Lost a lot of friends, ya hear?" He hits the side of my head with something metal. I see spots. Feel more blood leak from me. Behind him, their centurion checks his datapad. "You'd want the same for my kids, wouldn't you?" Danto searches my eyes for an answer. I have none he'd accept.

Like the rest, Danto's a veteran legionnaire, rough as a rusted sewer grate. Tech festoons his black combat gear, where scuffed purple dragons coil in faint filigree. Optic implants in the eyes for thermal vision and the reading of battlemaps. Under his skin he'll have more embedded tech to help him hunt Golds and Obsidians. The tattoo of an *XIII* clutched by a moving sea dragon stains all their necks, little heaps of ash at the base of the numeral. These are members of Legio XIII Dracones, the favored Praetorian legion of the Ash Lord and now his daughter, Aja. Civilians would just call them dragoons. Mustang hated the fanatics. It's a whole independent army of thirty thousand chosen by Aja to be the hand of the Sovereign away from Luna.

They hate me.

They hate lowColors with a marrow-deep racism even Golds can't match.

"Go for the ears, Danto, if you wanna make him yelp," one of the Grays suggests. The woman stands at the door, nutcracker jaw bob-

bing up and down as she gnaws on a gumbubble. Her ashen hair is shaved into a short Mohawk. Voice drawling in some Earthborn dialect. She leans against the metal beside a yawning male Gray with a delicate nose more like a Pink's than a soldier's. "You hit them with a cupped hand, you can pop the eardrum with the pressure."

"Thanks, Holi."

"Here to help."

Danto cups his hand. "Like this?" He hits my head.

"Little more curve to it."

The centurion snaps his fingers. "Danto. Grimmus wants him in one piece. Back up and let the doc take a look." I breathe a sigh of relief at the reprieve.

The fat Yellow doctor ambles forward to inspect me with beady ocher eyes. The pale lights above make the bald patch on his head shine like a pale, waxed apple. He runs his bioscope over my chest, watching the visual through little digital implants in his eyes. "Well, Doc?" the centurion asks.

"Remarkable," the Yellow whispers after a moment. "Bone density and organs are quite healthy despite the low-caloric diet. Muscles have atrophied, as we've observed in laboratory settings, but not as poorly as natural Aureate tissue."

"You're saying he's better than Gold?" the centurion asks.

"I did not say that," the doctor snaps.

"Relax. There's no cameras, Doc. This is a processing room. What's the verdict?"

"It can travel."

"It?" I manage in a low, unearthly growl from behind my muzzle.

The doctor recoils, surprised I can speak.

"And long-term sedation? Got three weeks to Luna at this orbit."

"That will be fine." The doctor gives me a frightened look. "But I would up the dose by ten milligrams per day, Captain, just to be safe. *It* has an abnormally strong circulatory system."

"Right." The captain nods to the female Gray. "You're up, Holi. Put him to bed. Then let's get the cart and roll out. You're square, Doc. Head back to your safe little espresso-and-silk world now. We'll take care of—"

Pop. The front half of the centurion's forehead comes off. Something metal hits the wall. I stare at the centurion, mind not processing why his face is gone. *Pop. Pop. Pop. Pop.* Like knuckle joints. Red mist geysers into the air from the heads of the nearest dragoons. Spraying my face. I duck my head away. Behind them, the nutcracker-jawed woman walks casually through their ranks, shooting them point-blank in the backs of their heads. The rest pull their rifles up, scrambling, unable to even utter curses before a second Gray double-taps five of them from his place at the door with an old-fashioned gunpowder slug shooter. Silencer on the barrel so it's cool and quiet. Obsidians are the first to hit the floor, leaking red.

"Clear," the woman says.

"Plus two," the man replies. He shoots the Yellow doctor as he crawls to the door trying to escape, then puts a boot on Danto's chest. The Gray stares up at him, bleeding from under the jaw.

"Trigg . . ."

"Ares sends his regards, motherfucker." The Gray shoots Danto just under the brim of his tactical helmet, between the eyes, and spins the slug shooter in his hand, blowing smoke from the end before sheathing it in a leg holster. "Clear."

My lips work against my muzzle, struggling to form a coherent thought. "Who . . . are you . . ." The Gray woman nudges a body out of her way.

"Name's Holiday ti Nakamura. That's Trigg, my baby brother." She raises a scar-notched eyebrow. Her wide face is blasted by freckles. Nose smashed flat. Eyes dark gray and narrow. "Question is, who are you?"

"Who am I?" I mumble.

"We came for the Reaper. But if that's you, I think we should get our money back." She winks suddenly. "I'm joking, sir."

"Holiday, cut it." Trigg pushes her aside protectively. "Can't you see he's shell-shocked?" Trigg approaches carefully, hands out, voice soothing. "You're prime, sir. We're here to rescue you." His words are thicker, less polished than Holiday's. I flinch as he takes another step. Search his hands for a weapon. He's going to hurt me. "Just gonna unlock you. That's all. You want that, yeah?"

It's a lie. A Jackal trick. He's got the *XIII* tattoo. These are Praetorians, not Sons. Liars. Killers.

"I won't unlock you if you don't want me to."

No. No, he killed the guards. He's here to help. He has to be here to help. I give Trigg a wary nod and he slips behind me. I don't trust him. I half expect a needle. A twist. But all I feel is release as my risk is rewarded. The cuffs unlock. My shoulder joints crack and, moaning, I pull my hands in front of my body for the first time in nine months. The pain causes them to shake. The nails have grown long and vile. But these hands are mine again. I charge to my feet to escape, and collapse to the floor.

"Whoa . . . whoa," Holiday says, hefting me back into the chair. "Easy there, hero. You've got mad muscle atrophy. Gonna need an oil change."

Trigg comes back around to stand in front of me, smiling lopsided, face open and boyish, not nearly as intimidating as his sister, despite the two gold teardrop tattoos that leak from his right eye. He has the look of a loyal hound. Gently he removes the muzzle from my face, then remembers something with a start. "I've got something for you, sir."

"Not now, Trigg." Holiday eyes the door. "Ain't got the seconds."

"He needs it," Trigg says under his breath, but waits till Holiday gives him a nod before he pulls a leather bundle from his tortoise pack. He extends it to me. "It's yours, sir. Take it." He senses my apprehension. "Hey, I didn't lie about unlocking you, did I?"

"No . . ."

I put my hands out and he sets the leather bundle in them. Fingers trembling, I pull back the string holding the bundle together and feel the power before I even see the deadly shimmer. My hands almost drop the bundle, as frightened of it as my eyes were of the light.

It is my razor. The one given to me by Mustang. The one I've lost twice now. Once to Karnus, then again at my Triumph to the Jackal. It is white and smooth as a child's first tooth. My hands slide over the cold metal and its salt-stained calf-leather grip. Touch wakening melancholy memories of strength long faded and warmth long forgotten. The smell of hazelnut drifts back to me, transporting me to Lorn's

practice rooms, where he would teach me as his favorite granddaughter learned to bake in the adjacent kitchen.

The razor slithers through the air, so beautiful, so deceitful in its promise of power. The blade would tell me I'm a god, as it has told generations of men who came before me, but I now know the lie in that. The terrible price it's made men pay for pride.

It scares me to hold it again.

And it rasps like a pitviper's mating call as it forms into a curved slingBlade. It was blank and smooth when last I saw it, but it ripples now with images etched into the white metal. I tilt the blade so I can better see the form etched just above the hilt. I stare dumbly. Eo looks back at me. An image of her etched into the metal. The artist caught her not on the scaffold, not in the moment that will forever define her to others, but intimately, as the girl I loved. She's crouched, hair messy about her shoulders, picking a haemanthus from the ground, looking up, just about to smile. And above Eo is my father kissing my mother at the door of our home. And toward the tip of the blade, Leanna, Loran, and I chasing Kieran down a tunnel, wearing Octobernacht masks. It is my childhood.

Whoever made this art knows me.

"The Golds carve their deeds into their swords. The *grand, violent* shit they've done. But Ares thought you'd prefer to see the people you love," Holiday says quietly from behind Trigg. She glances back to the door.

"Ares is dead." I search their faces, seeing the deceit there. Seeing the wickedness in their eyes. "The Jackal sent you. It's a trick. A trap. To lead you to the Sons' base." My hand tightens around the razor's grip. "To use me. You're lying."

Holiday steps back from me, wary of the blade in my hand. But Trigg is ripped apart by the accusation. "Lying? To *you*? We'd die for you, sir. We'd have died for Persephone . . . Eo." He struggles to find the words, and I get a sense he's used to letting his sister do the talking. "There's an army waiting for you outside these walls—does that register? An army waiting for its . . . its *soul* to come back to it." He leans forward imploringly as Holiday looks back to the door. "We're from South Pacifica, the ass end of Earth. I thought I'd die there

guarding grain silos. But I'm here. On Mars. And our only job is to get you home. . . ."

"I've met better liars than you," I sneer.

"Screw this." Holiday reaches for her datapad.

Trigg tries to stop her. "Ares said it was only for emergencies. If they hack the signal . . ."

"Look at him. This is an emergency." Holiday strips her datapad and tosses it to me. A call is going through to another device. Blinking blue on the display, waiting for the other side to answer. As I turn it in my hand, a hologram of a spiked sunburst helmet suddenly blossoms into the air, small as my clenched fist. Red eyes glow out balefully from the helmet.

"Fitchner?"

"*Guess again, shithead,*" the voice warbles.

It can't be.

"Sevro?" I almost whimper the word.

"*Oy, boyo, you look like you slithered out of a skeleton's rickety cooch.*"

"You're alive . . . ," I say as the holographic helmet slithers away to reveal my hatchet-faced friend. He smiles with those hacksaw teeth. Image flickering.

"*Ain't no Pixie in the worlds that can kill me.*" He cackles. "*Now it's time you come home, Reap. But I can't come to you. You gotta come to me. You register?*"

"How?" I wipe the tears from my eyes.

"*Trust my Sons. Can you do that?*"

I look at the brother and sister and nod. "The Jackal . . . he has my family."

"*That cannibalistic bitch ain't got shit. I got your family. Grabbed them from Lykos after you got snagged. Your mother's waiting to see you.*" I start crying again. The relief too much to bear.

"*But you gotta sack up, boyo. And you gotta move.*" He looks sideways at someone. "*Gimme back to Holiday.*" I do. "*Make it clean if you can. Escalate if you can't. Register?*"

"Register."

"*Break the chains.*"

“Break the chains,” the Grays echo as his image flickers out.

“Look past our Color,” Holiday says to me. She reaches a tattooed hand down. I stare at the Gray Sigils etched into her flesh, then look up to search her freckled, bluff face. One of her eyes is bionic, and does not blink like the other. Eo’s words sound so different from her mouth. Yet I think it’s the moment my soul comes back to me. Not my mind. I still feel the cracks in it. The slithering, doubting darkness. But my hope. I clutch her smaller hand desperately.

“Break the chains,” I echo hoarsely. “You’ll have to carry me.” I look at my worthless legs. “Can’t stand.”

“That’s why we brought you a little cocktail.” Holiday pulls up a syringe.

“What is it?” I ask.

Trigg just laughs. “Your oil change. Seriously, friend, you really don’t want to know.” He grins. “Shit will animate a corpse.”

“Give it to me,” I say, holding out my wrist.

“It’s gonna hurt,” Trigg warns.

“He’s a big boy.” Holiday comes closer.

“Sir . . .” Trigg hands me one of his gloves. “Between your teeth.”

A little less confident, I bite down on the salt-stained leather and nod to Holiday. She lunges past my wrist to jam the syringe straight into my heart. Metal punctures meat as the payload releases.

“Holy shit!” I try to scream, but it comes out as a gurgle. Fire cavorts through my veins, my heart a piston. I look down, expecting to see it galloping out of my bloodydamn chest. I feel every muscle. Every cell of my body exploding, pulsing with kinetic energy. I dry-heave. I fall, clawing at my chest. Panting. Spitting bile. Punching the floor. The Grays scramble back from my twisting body. I strike out at the chair, half ripping it from its bolted place in the floor. I let out a stream of curses that’d make Sevro blush. Then I tremble and look up at them. “What . . . was . . . *that*?”

Holiday tries not to laugh. “Mamma calls it snakebite. Only gonna last thirty minutes with your metabolism.”

“Your mamma made that?”

Trigg shrugs. “We’re from Earth.”